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SUBJECT: ISTANBUL MEZZES: SLICES OF LIFE FROM TURKEY'S
MEGALOPOLIS

Classified By: Consul General Deborah K. Jones for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

1. (U) This is the second in a series of cables offering a sampling of political, economic and human rights topics circulating in Istanbul; herewith, a special "Ramazan" edition.

Istanbul Iftars

2. (U) "Iftar," or the traditional breaking of the Ramadan ("Ramazan," in Turkish) fast, is celebrated widely by Muslim Turks, whether they fast or not, and by some non-Muslim Turks, as well. The nature of the various iftars, and their attendees, reveals the weft and warp of the rich tapestry that is Istanbul society.

3. (U) Among the many iftars attended by CG -- and a first in her experience -- was one hosted by the local Jewish Community, a tradition initiated nearly five years ago. Attendees at the October 11 gathering included the Mayor and Governor of Istanbul and a number of prominent Muslim businessmen, as well as both men and women from the Jewish community. The evening began with an Islamic call to prayer and ended with an imam's benediction, with a heartfelt sermon by the Chief Rabbi and the chanting of an internationally renowned, Istanbul-based cantor sandwiched in between. Only in Istanbul... (One attendee mentioned to CG that the avian flu scare had prompted several phone inquiries to the Chief Rabbi's office wondering whether chicken prepared in kosher fashion was safe to eat...)

4. (U) Another major iftar was hosted by the Justice and Development party (AKP) in honor of PM Erdogan and visiting outgoing German Chancellor Schroeder. Most notable about the 2000-guest event was the "big tent" quality of AK party adherents -- women covered and uncovered (in every sense), people young and old, academics and wealthy businessmen. The Ecumenical Patriarch was also present, as were, again, the Mayor and Governor of Istanbul. The highlight of the evening -- which included lengthy impassioned remarks by both Erdogan and Schroeder and repeated, ear-splitting renditions of the EU anthem -- was Schroeder's announcement mid-speech that Turkey had defeated Albania one-nil in their soccer match that evening, passed to him by an Erdogan advisor who was monitoring the game via Blackberry.

5. (SBU) One of Turkey's largest and most successful NGO's, Deniz Feneri, or "Lighthouse," hosted CG and members of Istanbul's Public Affairs staff for an iftar dinner October

17. Public Affairs earlier had identified an American advisor specializing in NGO operations to advise organizations in Istanbul. This Washington-state based individual had returned to continue his successful consultations and also joined. The iftar was preceded by a tour of the NGO's impressive facilities, which included a large warehouse, bank, and administrative offices, including rooms full of young volunteers -- the women largely, but not exclusively, covered -- staffing computer and phone banks accepting donations from all over the world, including the U.S. The neatly organized warehouse filled with bar-coded boxes of tents, clothing and other materials ready for shipment to those in need both domestically, within Turkey, and overseas (Pakistan, Indonesia, Bosnia inter alia), was striking, as was the Director's easy transition to fluent Syrian-dialect Arabic when he learned of CG's prior assignments. (His assistant "tour guide" then shifted to Arabic as well, somewhat more halting and classical, but correct.) Following the tour, we adjourned to a cafeteria with approximately 120 staff members, who waited quietly for the imam's call to prayer, then prayed openly over their meals and noisily dug in.

6. (C) Istanbul's pronouncedly nationalist/secularist "Marmara Group," comprising former military chiefs of staff, ministers and ambassadors -- quite literally the "old guard" -- converted an initial dinner invitation into an iftar event to welcome the CG, this one in an ornately decorated former Ottoman hunting palace on the Asian side of the Bosphorus, owned by one of the group's members and overflowing with Ottoman-era "orientalia." Their equally well-preserved and polished spouses attended. The evening was relatively light

on Islam (i.e., no visible prayers prior to digging in to the lavish repast) and rather heavier on politics, with the group's chairman stressing in his welcoming remarks their hopes that the U.S. mission here would continue to focus on people-to-people relationships as well as government-to-government; read: "We're not all AKP." Former ministers expressed doubts that the younger generation could produce a credible, viable opposition to the dominant AK Party while also decrying the Turkish judiciary's gratuitous and embarrassing political interventions in Turkish affairs.

17. (C) MARIFED, an umbrella organization for Marmara region business associations (including the Gulenist Business Life Association (ISHAD)), hosted visiting CDA McEldowney at an October 25 iftar. Some 35 businessmen (the only women in the room were CDA, CG and poloff), representing mostly small to medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) shared details about their companies and business goals in the U.S., most nodding in agreement as the Charge hailed the crucial contribution Turkish and American entrepreneurs make to the Turkey-U.S. relationship. The hosts, eager to accommodate the CDA's tight schedule, selected Istanbul's famous "Beyti" restaurant, strategically located just minutes from Ataturk Airport. Following the CDA's departure, the conversation at the head table turned to Fetullah Gulen and his teachings and was interrupted when the President of the Turkish Exporters Assembly popped in from an adjacent room and invited the CG to join yet another iftar event the restaurant was hosting for Turkey's Minister of Education, Istanbul's Governor, PM Special Advisor Cuneyd Zapsu, Istanbul's Chief of Police and faculty members from Fatih University, inter alia.

18. (U) At a more secular version of iftar for Turkish Mercedes employees October 24 attended by conoff, the conversation turned to the rigors of going without food from sunup to sundown. All of the dozen workers agreed that fasting for the entire month of Ramazan was "extreme;" most said they fasted one or two days and tried to quit a bad habit, like smoking, for the duration. One of the more senior employees announced that, rather than forego food, he had given up speeding, something he insisted was a real hardship given that his company car was a high-performance coupe. When another of the Turks responded that fast driving on Istanbul's sclerotic streets was difficult in the best of circumstances, and virtually impossible during the frenetic Ramazan binge-shopping season, the more senior employee replied -- without a trace of irony -- that it is the thought that counts.

19. (C) Istanbulites debate whether the change to an Islam-oriented government has transformed what traditionally had been a private family gathering into increasingly public, political events. One non-Muslim religious leader told us he would no longer attend iftars because of his feeling they are cosmetic and obscure the fact that serious issues and problems remain for Turkey's minority communities.

Diyanet Hotline Calls Pick Up During Ramadan

10. (U) For two years, the Diyanet has been providing a telephone information service to citizens who want to ensure they are in line with the requirements of their faith. The Mufti's office in each province operates its service separately and Istanbul staffs the line with two to three officials (including women), who work in shifts. The number of calls increases during Ramadan with citizens inquiring about fasting. Some callers wonder if they can receive injections, others ask if they can hold their wives' hands or kiss her during the day. Last year the Istanbul mufti told us the line also received questions about "zekat," the Islamic requirement that one share two percent, traditionally, of one's wealth each year with the less fortunate: how much, to whom; and how calculated. Women lacking other outlets reportedly use the line to ask questions about family, social and other "private" issues. Officials are planning to introduce an on-line service in future.

Minister Koc in the Hot Seat Again

11. (SBU) Turkish press was abuzz over the October 8 13-hour journey of a holy Islamic relic, the Sakal-i Serif (hairs from the beard of the Prophet Mohammed), from an Istanbul mosque to Ataturk Airport and back. Diyanet officials reportedly asked the Eyup district Mufti to send the relic to the airport while Culture Minister Atilla Koc was there for a 1 a.m. layover. Press caught wind of the story as the relic passed through an x-ray machine, and Koc has been under attack ever since - including from within his own party. "They brought it to the airport, I saw it, and it was brought back. That's it," he told Hurriyet newspaper October 10. Speculation continues as to why it was taken to begin with. One version suggested that visiting Dubai Crown Prince Mohammed bin Rashid had asked to see the relic, but it

was soon pointed out that he'd departed the day before.
Another explanation holds that government officials were
readying a response to the Kingdom of Jordan about its
request to exhibit the relic during Ramadan; Koc wanted to
examine it during his layover in that context. "Doesn't the
Sakal-i Serif go from mosque to mosque anyway so that Muslims
can see it? Am I not a Muslim?" he asked.
Saying Goodbye

12. (U) The funeral of Nermin Erbakan, wife of former Prime
Minister and behind the scenes Saadet Party leader Necmettin
Erbakan, was held October 24 at Istanbul's Fatih Mosque with
nearly ten thousand people in attendance. Among those paying
their respects were AKP Speaker of Parliament Bulent Arinc,
former Prime Minister Tansu Ciller (Erbakan's former
coalition partner), DYP leader Mehmet Agar, leader of the
Islamist-nationalist Greater Union Party (BBP), Nuhsin
Yazicioglu, representatives from other political parties, and
reportedly two "tarikat" leaders. Erbakan received a visit
from his former protege PM Erdogan and his wife, which
brought the two together for the first time in three years.
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